

CATHY WURZER: It's the end of an era and the start of a new one for one school system on the Iron Range. This Thursday, the Virginia Eveleth Gilbert school system will hold a grand ceremony for its new Rock Ridge High School auditorium. Later this month, they'll say goodbye to the former space, the Goodman auditorium that was in the Virginia High School, and the farewell there will be done in a very special way.

The ornate auditorium is a stunning space, hosting concerts and other events since 1917. Virginia High School and the Goodman were a part of the Iron Range's history. And to hear that story, we turn to Aaron Brown, a writer, a historian, college instructor who wrote about the Goodman for the *Mesabi Tribune* and for his Minnesota Brown blog. Aaron, how are you?

AARON BROWN: Hi, Cathy. I'm well. How are you?

CATHY WURZER: Good. It's nice to hear your voice again. Thanks for taking time out here over your noon hour. Say, of course, you know I love old buildings. The Goodman auditorium, when you look at pictures, looks like the equally ornate Hibbing High School auditorium, which is also stunning. Tell me a little bit about these high schools, these auditoriums that were built across the range in the 1910s and 1920s.

AARON BROWN: Yeah, there was about a seven year period where the schools of the Iron Range-- where they were building new schools and building some of the finest auditoriums in the country. And it was because of a twist in the mining taxation laws of the early 20th century, a relatively boring topic to most.

But what it allowed was for the communities of the Iron Range to capture the iron ore revenue at the mouth of the mine and keep more of it for their community, for instance, than they keep today. And as a result, they were trying to build these lasting edifices of education and culture. And so the Goodman was one of the first-- actually was, I think, the first of the big auditoriums, the new ones, in 1917.

And in fact, inspired the Hibbing auditorium, which was built about five years later, to be even bigger and more ornate than the Goodman. But these are gorgeous, Broadway-style theaters of literally another time. They're built for the age of vaudeville and classical music performance and an age before electric amplification. They're designed to aid the unamplified voice. Of course, the challenge is, as time has gone by, how do you maintain these things?

CATHY WURZER: I'm sure that's probably right. But gosh, there's so much history. Is it not possible to save something like that?

AARON BROWN: Well, Hibbing has. And the difference is that the Hibbing auditorium probably started earlier on restoration efforts and maintenance efforts. There's actually a foundation that was formed just for the financial needs of maintaining an auditorium space like that.

The Goodman had fallen, I guess we'd call it into some disrepair. It was losing its edge as a functional performance space over the last 20 years. And in fact, had a lot of big problems that were challenging for the students and community theater and music groups that were trying to use the space.

So that is the difference. You have to maintain them. And a few of the towns have, and some of the towns are-- like Virginia, they looked at the cost of fixing up the Goodman, and knew that they were going to be building this new Rock Ridge High School and considered all their options. And the voters and leaders of those communities, Virginia, Eveleth, and Gilbert, decided to build a new school with a new, more modern auditorium. And that's the direction they went.

**CATHY
WURZER:**

So now there's this opportunity to say goodbye to the Goodman, which is, I think, this goodbye, it looks like it's going to be a beautiful performance. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

**AARON
BROWN:**

Yeah. They got a composer, Dr. René Clausen, a Minnesota guy who composed an original performance, a original symphonic concert, I guess we'd call it, the Sleeping Giant, which is, of course, the Ojibwe-- the translation of which is the Ojibwe word misaabe or mesaba.

And the sleeping giant is a musical piece in four acts that tells the story of the glaciers that carved the land and the people that came and the mining and the future of the range.

And really that's the purpose of the program, as its organizers would be quick to tell you, to tell the story of these wonderful, old traditions that were formed out of this very unique time in human history when the iron ore of the Iron Range changed the world, especially in how it supported the United States' growth as a major superpower.

But then where is this region going in the future? And that piece of music, as [? Dominic ?] [? Olivante, ?] who I spoke with for the story-- he's a local theater director and speech coach and an alumni of Virginia. And he said, this is something that's going to last and going to be a piece of music that will tell the story of this place for a long time.

And they wanted to debut it as the final program at the Goodman, as a way of connecting the two generations together.

**CATHY
WURZER:**

You spoke with the leader of a community development group called Revive Virginia about controlling the narrative. Yeah, exactly. About controlling the narrative of Virginia. What's the narrative about Virginia that this event is trying to tell?

**AARON
BROWN:**

I think they would tell you that they believe Virginia and other communities on the range, but they're concerned with Virginia, is moving forward, is moving into a new era when things aren't going to be the same. Of course, we know that, for instance, tax legislation changed almost 100 years or more than 100 years ago, in a way that made it impossible to tax at the rates that they did back then.

And so the communities have been, in varying forms, struggling ever since, struggling to afford to keep that tradition of education and culture going. And I think they're trying to tell the story of a town and a place, the Iron Range, that's adjusting to the changes of a modern time, a time when people's personal cultural habits have changed.

I like to point out that when these big auditoriums were built, there was no Netflix. Netflix was going down to your local auditorium to watch a traveling classical music show or a vaudeville show. And that was your Netflix. There was nothing at home to entertain you.

And in fact entering these grand spaces was like a lot of the old cathedrals and churches of Europe. It was an escape from a life that was actually quite difficult. And now we sit in our comfy couches and watch shows.

And so trying to create a space that gets people to come out of their houses and hear and experience things with better sound, that's what they're trying to say, is that they're creating a space in the new theater that is going to be very, very good. The quality of the material they can do there is even better.

CATHY By the way, have you seen the new auditorium?

WURZER:

AARON I haven't been in there yet. It's going to be exciting. Yeah.

BROWN:

CATHY Well, you are always great to talk with me. This sounds like the concert will be beautiful. And as I say, the
WURZER: Goodman, I can only imagine. Maybe, perhaps, there's a way to save some of the decorative parts of that auditorium? Who knows, right? But I mean--

AARON Yeah, it's going to be-- it's all plastered in there. It's going to be challenging. Of course, some of the chandeliers
BROWN: and things will be salvaged. But yeah, that's going to be a hard day, when that comes down, as it eventually will. But I guess so goes the wheels of progress. Change is always around the corner.

CATHY Yeah. Aaron, I appreciate your time. Thank you so much.

WURZER:

AARON

BROWN:

CATHY Thanks, Cathy.

WURZER:

CATHY That's Aaron Brown. He's a writer, historian, college instructor. He wrote about the Goodman for the "Mesabi
WURZER: Tribune" and for his Minnesota Brown blog. Now, he wrote about this farewell to the Goodman, and you're going to be hearing this choral composition piece I leave with you from René Clausen.

The farewell to Goodman concert will take place May 20th at 7:00 PM at the Goodman auditorium in Virginia, Minnesota, and that will feature the world premiere of a four part symphony called "Mesabi, the Sleeping Giant" written by Dr. Clausen, performed by the Mesabi Symphony Orchestra and members of the local high school orchestra and choirs.